DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 155 770 CS 502 159

AUTHOR Deming, Caren J.
TITLE Iconizing the Modern Woman: New Symbols in the Same Old Myth.
PUB DATE Dec 77
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (63rd, Washington, D.C., December 1-4, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Changing Attitudes; *Characterization; *Commercial Television; Cultural Images; *Females; *Programing (Broadcast); *Sex Role; *Sex Stereotypes; Social Change; Symbols (Literary); Working Women

ABSTRACT

Current television programs create an image of modern woman that is vastly different from the real modern woman as she is reflected in social statistics. Today's average woman can be described as follows: 30 years old, possibly single, employed outside the home, independent and self reliant, sophisticated in tastes and expectations, and concerned about a youthful, healthy appearance for career reasons. Prime time television women are similar to this description in age, single status, and career orientation. However, while the television woman speaks about individualism and appears modern, her attitudes and values are actually safely old fashioned and conservative. Analysis of several current comedy series demonstrates that strong fathers outnumber strong mothers in decision making, women are the cooks and homemakers, female inexperience and social ineptitude are highlighted, women seek fulfillment through winning a husband, and often the plots are concerned with competition between women for the same man. (HAI)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED155770

Iconizing the Modern Woman: New Symbols in the Same Old Myth

Caren J. Deming

San Francisco State University

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Caren J. Deming
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

Speech Communication Association, 63rd Annual Meeting

Washington, D. C., 1-4 December 1977

The advances of America's second women's movement present the television industry with a paradox. As the traditional prime target for consumer marketing, women viewers have been courted relentlessly by television programmers. In order to nurture the loyalty of modern women viewers, television programs must change with those viewers. Authentic social change however, is not necessarily of great interest to an industry that profits handsomely with things as they are.[1] Thus, the industry promotes the illusion, but not necessarily the substance, of the modern woman.

That television lags behind the changing attitudes of its viewers was demonstrated in a poll by McHugh and Hoffman earlier this year:

> During the last 10 years, the failure of the TV programers to stay in step with the audience's maturation and to remain sensitive to the societal force and functions of the medium, has caused a serious "loosening" of the audience commitment to the medium.[2]

Certainly television has not fostered the new mythology made necessary by the evolving social order. In order to maintain the illusion of modernity where women are concerned, television casts the symbols associated with the liberated woman in a mold that suits television's basic conservatism. It

CS502 '57

does so by creating inauthentic rather than genuine images of the modern woman.

The genuine icon is a symbolic figure that epitomizes human ideals. In other words, the icon is the organizing principle for the themes and symbols people care about. The inauthentic icon, on the other hand, is an object of commercial exploitation. The difference between authentic and inauthentic icons is the difference between the genuine herowoman and the Cher doll. In masculine symbology, it is the difference between the hero redeemer and Captain Cosmic.[3] Both classes of icons are easy enough to understand, but only the authentic icon helps us to understand ourselves.

The symbols associated with these two kinds of icons are different too. Television's icon draws significance from her association, not with the moon or the earth, but with overzealous hair and incandescent teeth. The iconizing of Farrah Fawcett-Majors reminds me of a Peanuts cartoon. In that cartoon, Charlie Brown shows off a life-size poster of himself that he has had made as a surprise for his parents. Lucy thinks it's a great idea. Linus, however, thinks it's risky: "After the parents get a poster, they might decide they don't need the kid!"[4] We prefer our own clear, uncomplicated image of reality to the bundle of ambiguities that any real, living person is.

Image-making is neither new nor unnatural. One's choice of images does matter, however. With the rest of my time, I will examine some of commercial television's choices against the background of the characteristics of the real, modern American woman.

The Modern Woman in Real Life

Who is the real modern woman? We know she isn't Farrah Fawcett or the Virgin Mary. The question is a difficult one because the American woman is changing so rapidly. In marketing terminology, she is a "moving target." Television programmers appear to be confused about her characteristics. (It is not surprising that television programmers are more confused by the women's movement than women are.) In the confusion, one thing is certain--it's more likely that her demographer (rather than her hairdresser) knows for sure.

In 1977, demographers are aware that women (an American majority since [illegible]) are changing. The average female, who is about 30 years old, is older than the average female at the turn of the century, who was 22.4 years old.[5] In every decade since 1900, women aged 65 and older have comprised a larger share of the female population. Writing in the Journal of Marketing, Lazer and Smallwood identify many of these women as "younger olders" and describe them as follows:

> Often, they are cosmopolitan in taste, well-traveled, educated, knowledgeable, and very politically active. Many are relatively free of work and want, and some have substantial financial resources. They are interested in the "maintenance of self," both medically and in appearance. They will become more visible in the total population, increasing by 6 million between 1975 and 2000.[6]

Aunt Bluebell had better look out.

In addition to being older, modern women increasingly are single. In 1950, 28 percent of women in the 20-24 age group were single. By 1975, this figure was 40 percent. As more women choose not to marry or to

postpone marriage (and then outlive their husbands), the number of single women in both the younger and older categories is increasing.

The modern woman also works outside the home. In 1974, 63 percent of the work force was female (47 percent of full-time workers), and this percentage is increasing. In 1975, 44 percent of married women were working, and over half of the women with husbands and school-age children also were working.[7] Because of economic pressure and the legitimizing effect of the women's movement, the working wife is the new norm. As a consumer, the "workwife" exerts heavy influence where major purchases are concerned. Also, she is getting better educated. She is likely to assign major food shopping responsibility to someone else, and she uses an increasing amount of her leisure time in guilt-free pleasure-seeking.[8]

Attitudinally, this modern working woman, whether married or single, tends to be more independent and self-confident than the non-working woman. She tends to be cosmopolitan and sophisticated in her tastes and expectations. In her television, the modern woman prefers "individual-oriented comedy" to "family-oriented" programs (such as The Waltons), especially if she works. In radio she is much more likely to prefer rock or top-forty music than her traditional counterpart.[9] She places a premium on her youthful, healthy appearance in order to advance her career rather than to please a husband or boyfriend.[10]

Above all, market researchers agree that the modern working woman is seeking the development and expression of her own individualism.[11] Their research underlines the inadequacy of traditional portrayals of housewives and

sex symbols for modern women. What marketing experts call the "New Demographics" suggests that the old monolithic target--"any woman, 18-49"--is woefully archaic, if, indeed, it ever had validity.

The Modern Woman on Television

Before we exceed our tolerance levels for reality, let us look at prime-time television's version of the modern woman. At the start of the 1977 season, the three commercial networks were running 53 series. In a count by Ann Northrop, 40 of these were headlined by men. So much for the majority. As for the lack of female game show emcees, Northrop comments:

> It may be acceptable to watch strong women in fiction--but not as the dispensers of real money and real cars and real refrigerators to real people.[12]

A closer look at these fictional women is in order.

Like their living counterparts, the prime-time women do seem to be aging somewhat. Among programs featuring women closer to 30 than to 20 are Rhoda (CBS), The Man from Atlantis (NBC), We've Got Each Other (CBS), On Our Own (CBS), One Day at a Time (CBS), and Laverne and Shirley (ABC). Each network also carries at least one family show with a mother who--though she may not look it--has to be over 30 to have so many children: Mulligan's Stew (NBC), The Fitzpatricks (CBS), and Eight Is Enough (ABC). Unquestionably middle-aged women are found regularly on Police Woman (NBC), Family (ABC), Alice (CBS), Chico and the Man (NBC), All in the Family (CBS), The Jeffersons (CBS), The Tony Randall Show (CBS), The Betty White Show (CBS), Soap (ABC), and elsewhere. In a few years, we

might put Maude and Aunt Esther (Sanford Arms, NBC) in the demographers' "younger older" category. To say the least, there is room for growth here.

Also like real, modern women, television's modern women often are single. Among the shows featuring single women on ABC are Charlie's Angels, Laverne and Shirley, Logan's Run, and Three's Company. On CBS, the singles' shows include The New Adventures of Wonder Woman, On Our Own, Rhoda, The Betty White Show, Alice, and One Day at a Time. NBC shows single women regularly in programs such as Police Woman, The Man from Atlantis, Sanford Arms, and Chico and the Man. As we shall see presently, television's single woman tends to spend her time trying to catch a man. In this, perhaps, she is not so modern.

The modern woman of prime time also works outside the home. All of the single women work outside their homes, though some have all but unidentified jobs because we do not see them at work. Television's working women do a fairly wide range of traditional and nontraditional jobs. There are the usual waitresses, nurses, teachers, and volunteers, as well as a scientist, brewery workers, and advertising women. A healthy dose of female crime fighters is peculiar in this off-season for crime programs. In addition to the old standbys--Pepper Anderson, bionic Jaime Somers, Wonder Woman, and Charlie's Angels--we now have Betty White playing Joyce Whitman playing Undercover Woman, officer Cloris (Carter Country, ABC), and Nancy Drew. We also have Judge Eleanor Hooper (The Tony Randall Show), and Assistant District Attorney Jessica Hornesby (Rossetti and Ryan). If serious crime drama is waning, law-and-order comedy is not.

In the new, comic law enforcement, one might say (and maybe even be forgiven by a generous audience for saying it) that women characters are out in full force.

Working wives, too, are prominent, especially in new programs. Judy (We've Got Each Other) manages a photo studio. Jane (Mulligan's Stew) is a school nurse. Maggie (The Fitzpatricks) works part-time in a diner, though her advancing pregnancy soon should put a stop to that.

All but one of television's new workwives tend to lose their modernity when they get home. "Father knows best" may no longer have the force of a commandment, but strong fathers still seem to have the edge over strong mothers when it comes to decision-making. Most of the cooking and serving still is done by wives, except in We've Got Each Other. Despite its dependence on the telltale cliches of modern living, this series portrays husband-wife role reversal more promisingly than Norman Lear's All That Glitters did last year. In We've Got Each Other, Judy is the modern woman. She unabashedly declares, "I never wear a bra." She does wear glasses and, refreshingly, is not beautiful or glamorous. She is the smart one in the family. A recent program centers on Judy's need for solitude and for escape from demands made by others, including her husband (19 November 1977). Stuart is responsible for cooking and home maintenance because he has a job that allows him to work at home.

Although Judy is comfortable and secure in her role, Stuart is silly in his. When she comes home tired and frazzled from too much talk and activity, he wants to go to sausage-stuffing class. Statements such as "Men hover

more than women however" reflect Stuart's insecurity. He constantly raises questions about differences between men and women as he explores the implications of his role. Making someone look silly is generic to comedy, but We've Got Each Other comes closer (than any other new series) to honest consideration of the modern woman.

We might pause here to note that a man (though not a husband) also does the cooking in Three's Company. The apparent reversal of traditional sex roles here is excused in several ways, however. First, Jack is a student chef, and his household responsibility is seen as practice for his profession. Second, and more central to the comedy, Jack is gay. Thus, his nontraditionally male activities are no surprise. Furthermore, no sensible human would allow Chrissy (one of his apartment-mates) in the kitchen. She can't even say "spaghetti" (she says "busghetti"), let alone cook it (she puts it in the blender).

In numbers, working women, single women, and mature women are well represented in the 1977 television season. More significant than these external characteristics, however, are the attitudes and values that define the modern woman. Is television's modern woman independent, self-confident, sophisticated, and individualistic? Not often. The theme song of Laverne and Shirley may say, "We do it our way;" but a dejected Laverne won't call her father because "he hollers at me" (8 November 1977). In the same program, Shirley announces, "My life is over. I'll never get married."

In a similar vein, the concerns of Julia and Maria (On Our Own) revolve around the men who enter their office. When their workload gets heavy,

Julia yearns to be a secretary again. Maria concurs, suggesting that they have chosen neither celibacy nor independence: "Staying late at the office makes us nice girls." When a power failure puts Julia and the office in the dark, she tries to calm herself by lighting an Idaho potato candle and repeating, "I am not afraid of the dark." Barry, a San Francisco swinger from the next office, joins Julia; and she plays the naive innocent, despite her protestations that she is not Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm (6 November 1977).

Rhoda is more experienced, though this year she is afflicted with redundant, post-divorce paralysis. Rhoda's plots center on her encounters with men, none of which she initiates. Recently she has been involved with Mike, who joined forces with Rhoda's boss to coerce her into a date. Jack (the boss) tells Rhoda how to behave because she is "too emotional" to deal with the situation. When Mike tells her he wants "no ties, no involvement, no confinement," Rhoda replies, "I like security" (6 November 1977). In a later program, Brenda encourages Rhoda to go on a ski weekend with Mike. When Rhoda expresses surprise at Brenda's attitude, Brenda assures her that her values still are safely traditional: "I am very liberated--when it's your life" (13 November 1977).

Crime fighters Pepper Anderson and Wonder Woman are more self-confident characters. Each, however, frequently stands back to let a man capture a wrongdoer, behavior which is especially peculiar for a woman who has superhuman powers. The character of Jessica in Logan's Run is more worrisome, that is, if we are to put stock in this program's vision of the future. In contrast to the functional clothing worn by Logan and Rem, Jessica

wears a decidedly dysfunctional pink mini-tunic. Available for repeated rescuing, Jessica seldom contributes information or logic to the characters' problem-solving efforts.

There are a few consistently confident and independent, modern women on prime-time television this year. Judy Hibbard (We've Got Each Other) and Ann Romano (One Day at a Time) come to mind immediately. In addition, Joyce Whitman (The Betty White Show), Maude, Alice, Flo (Alice), Aunt Esther (Sanford Arms), and Della (Chico and the Man) suggest that strength of character may accrue with age.

Cosmopolitan taste and sophistication do not seem to come so naturally to television's modern woman, however. To the contrary, much of her humor derives from her social ineptitude. For example, Rhoda's sister Brenda, who confesses to being no good at entertaining, demonstrates her unfamiliarity with the conventions of drinking (traditionally a male domain) by pouring a guest a tumbler full of scotch unrelieved by ice or water (6 November 1977). On the same network the following week, Julia is arrested for possessing Keith Keith's marijuana plants. To the arresting officer, she says, "No kidding. Is that what marijuana plants look like?" Later, to the great consternation of her friends, Julia cannot get to the point of her story (On Our Own, 13 November 1977). Maria, her business partner, suffers each week from her own chronic affliction--severe "overactivity"--the main symptom of which is pointless running and jumping about the set.

More obviously lacking in sophistication, of course, are the working-class, working women, such as Alice, Flo, Vera, Laverne, and Shirley.

However, these characters do engage in guilt-free pleasure-seeking. In one program this fall, the waitresses of Mel's diner seek recreation in a singles bar. Vera had suggested a preference for the squaredance at the Y; but once at the bar she has little trouble getting into the swing of things, even pretending to be a stewardess (Alice, 6 November 1977).

In their own search for pleasure, Laverne and Shirley spend two episodes this fall sailing from Milwaukee to Detroit, on a "Fiesta del Great Lakes" cruise (Laverne and Shirley, 8, 15 November 1977). The reason for their trip, of course, is men. Shirley is explicit about her goal: "I'm here to meet gentlemen, not sailors." Laverne is less discriminating: "I'm always thinking of sailors" (8 November 1977). The catching and keeping of men is frequently the explicit goal of television's modern woman, particularly in situation comedies. Thus, the authentic modern woman's priority on developing and expressing her own individuality is perverted in television.

Week after week (and night after night) prime-time television's "modern woman" seeks fulfillment in a man, and the "new myth" isn't new at all. When a character strays from the pattern, she is taught the error of her ways by the end of the program. For example, Louise Jefferson has developed an interest in archaeology. George refuses to let her go on a weekend dig, even though he doesn't know she plans to go alone with the handsome Dr. Jessup. George wants the total woman, and he wants her at home on Saturday nights, in case he wants a sandwich. At the advice of a friend, Louise stays at home in order not to risk disruption of her marriage (The Jeffersons, 19 November 1977).

On the same night, an unmarried character on another program (The Tony Randall Show) follows a similar pattern. Judge Eleanor Hooper tries dating someone new. She soon comes back to the possessive Walter, admitting that she was wrong to think there should be more to life than Thursday night dinners at Balducci's.

Another old theme that has been played out with disturbing regularity this fall is the competition among two or more women for the same man. At the singles bar, one dexterous basketball coach lands Alice, Flo, and Vera (Alice, 6 November 1977). In their season opener, Julia and Maria compete for the same actor, who uses the same line on each of them (On Our Own, 9 October 1977). On NBC, Jaime Somers is accused of stealing Calahan's (Oscar's secretary) hairdresser-lover (The Bionic Woman, 12 November 1977). Joyce Whitman (The Betty White Show)--whose chief aim in life seems to be to seduce her former husband--has a running battle with the sexy Tracy Garrett, whose jabs focus on Joyce's age. Finally, the contest is not off limits to mothers and daughters. Kate Lawrence (Family) and Ann Romano (One Day at a Time, 11 October 1977) have been shown vying with their respective daughters for the attention of a man.

Perhaps there are programmers somewhere who sense at some level that sisterhood (like motherhood) really is powerful. More likely, however, such themes as those above are simply the traditional residue meant to keep television's modern woman from appearing unintelligible, threatening, or simply boring, to traditionally-minded audiences. Television's modern woman is up-to-date on the outside and safely old-fashioned on the inside. She has

some of the trappings of the new woman--a job, her own apartment, a sex drive, even a few battle scars. Repeatedly she says she wants to be on her own, doing things her way. Yet she spends much of her weekly air time--precious commodity that it is--following a man instead of her own star. The persistent repetition of this theme, as well as the others discussed earlier, undermines her authenticity as an icon.

The real American modern woman soon may find more images in television that speak to her, however. I am optimistic about this because marketing experts know who the real modern woman is. Moreover, they are telling advertisers and programmers who she is. The need to advertise is soon to bring about a fourth commercial network. The same pressure that will bring us a new network may yet bring the authentic modern woman to prime-time television. As the target moves, so may television have to move to keep up with her.

Notes

[1]See "1976: The Biggest by Far for TV." Broadcasting, 29 August 1977, p. 24.

[2]"The Viewer's Ahead of the Medium, Says Major Study," Broadcasting, 6 June 1977, p. 35.

[3]Captain Cosmic, played by Bob Wilkins, is local television's answer to Star Wars. Captain Cosmic (a camp Luke Skywalker), accompanied by the robot 2T2, hosts daily science fiction movies on KTVU, Oakland, California.

[4]Charles Schulz, Peanuts, 20 March 1977.

[5]William Lazer and John E. Smallwood, "The Changing Demographics of Women: Trends That Have Great and Growing Significance for Marketing Management," Journal of Marketing 41 (July 1977): 14. The authors cite as basic references the monthly Current Population Report of the Bureau of the Census, the 1970 Census, the Census publication Status, and reports of government surveys and vital statistics.

[6]Ibid., p. 15.

[7]Ibid., pp. 14-17.

[8]Suzanne H. McCall, "Meet the 'Workwife,'" Journal of Marketing 41 (July 1977): 57-63.

[9]Fred D. Reynolds, Melvin R. Crask, and William D. Wells, "The Modern Feminine Life Style," Journal of Marketing 41 (July 1977): 41.

[10]Ibid., p. 42.

[11]For example, see Suzanne H. McCall, "Meet the 'Workwife,'" Rena Bartos, "The Moving Target: The Impact of Women's Employment on Consumer Behavior," and William J. Lundstrom and Donald Sciglimpaglia, "Sex Role Portrayals in Advertising," Journal of Marketing 41 (July 1977): 55-65, 31-37, and 72-79, respectively.

[12]Ann Northrop, "This May Be the Year to Stay Tuned," Ms., December 1977, p. 44.

Caren J. Deming, Assistant Professor
Broadcast Communication Arts Department
San Francisco State University
1600 Holloway Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94132